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MUSIC IN JERSEY

Vocalists highlight a Symphony spectacular

By MICHAEL REDMOND

A program that features Maureen Forrester singing Mahler and the Pro Arte Choral singing Prokofiev could hardly be expected to fail, so the smashing success that the New Jersey Symphony Orchestra (NJSO) made of it came as no great surprise.

Perhaps the principal reason to celebrate Sunday's concert in Newark Symphony Hall was the reception the audience offered to Mahler's "Songs of a Wayfarer" and Prokofiev's "Alexander Nevsky." These are both important works (the Mahler is no less than a miracle), but neither is of the Beethoven-Brahms-Tchaikovsky school of programming so dear to the hearts of many NJSO subscribers.

A lion's share of the praise is due not only to the program itself—an outstanding marriage of poetry and drama in music—but particularly to Roger Nierenberg, Pro Arte's lavishly gifted music director, who is the NJSO's guest conductor for the current series of concerts.

Nierenberg, who has been with Pro Arte for seven seasons, also serves as music director of the Stamford Symphony and associate conductor of the National Orchestra in New York. He has guest-conducted the National Symphony in Washington, D.C., the Baltimore Symphony and the Mostly Mozart Festival Orchestra in Lincoln Center—at those times when he has not been busy transforming Pro Arte into one of the finest volunteer choruses in the metropolitan area, if not the entire country.

It is evident from these credentials that Nierenberg is ideally suited to conduct a program as voice-centered as the NJSO's—in which even the opening piece, the overture to Weber's "Oberon," is voice-related. And he did so with relish and total assurance.

As a Mahler singer, Maureen Forrester is just about incomparable. There really are no words for what this statuesque Canadian is able to do with her rich, resonant, gleaming contralto—as sonorous as an organ at

the bottom of the range, and lustrous as old gold at the top.

Color comes instantly to mind in attempting to describe the Forrester sound. One of its most remarkable qualities is its wide palette—a resource she exploited to the full in "Songs of a Wayfarer."

Other than this Mahler cycle, there are few examples in the orchestral literature of a score that so simply and perfectly expresses the essence of poetic texts. Schubert could do it—but with piano.

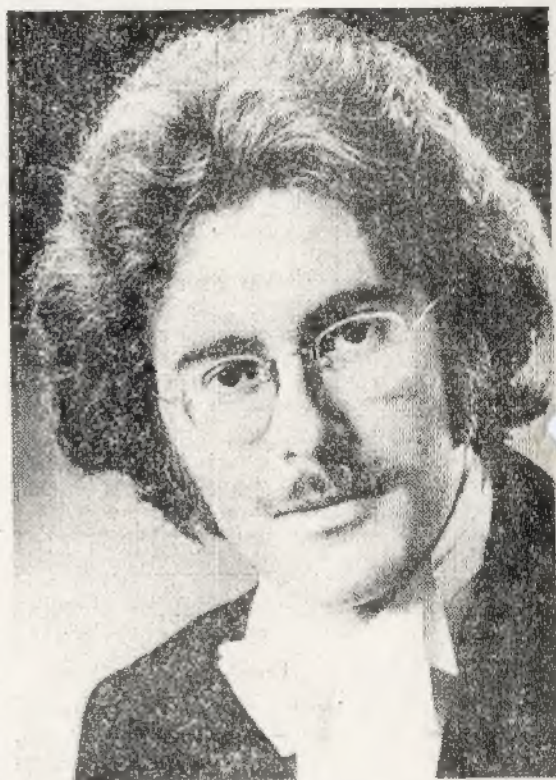
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In contrast to the intimacy of "Wayfarer," which can be compared to a series of miniatures, Prokofiev's "Alexander Nevsky" is a mural. A big mural. Loud. Extravagantly scored. As Russian as blini. And film music at its best (the cantata is derived from Prokofiev's score for Eisenstein's "Alexander Nevsky").

Nierenberg, who took exquisite care in the Mahler to support Miss Forrester and to create translucent atmospheres, let the orchestra rip in the Prokofiev, as it should. There wasn't much that he could do with the opening three sections, which are the weakest of the work, but Nierenberg and his forces were brilliant in the thrilling "Battle on Ice" and the lachrymose "Field of the Dead"—the latter with solo by Miss Forrester. In sum, the Prokofiev turned out to be a sensational earwash, and a bravo is due to all concerned.

My only quibble is with Pro Arte, which sang magnificently enough, but sounded precisely like a group of Americans singing in Russian. The choristers had no problems with the Latin in the text, but the glottal-nasal characteristics of Russian pronunciation eluded them.

The program will be repeated on Saturday in Trenton's War Memorial Auditorium, on Sunday in the Englewood Plaza, on April 23 in Newark Symphony Hall, and on April 24 in the Monmouth Arts Center, Red Bank. Tickets are available through the New Jersey Symphony Orchestra in Newark.



Roger Nierenberg conducts the New Jersey Symphony Orchestra with 'total assurance'